



ASSOCIATION EUROPÉENNE DES VOIES VERTES
EUROPEAN GREENWAYS ASSOCIATION
ASOCIACIÓN EUROPEA DE VÍAS VERDES

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EGWA's Contribution to the European Sustainable Tourism Strategy

Introduction

Greenways are communication routes reserved exclusively for **non-motorised travel**, developed in both urban and rural areas across Europe. By reusing disused or “recycled” infrastructure—such as former railway lines, towpaths, and historic heritage trails, including industrial heritage—they respond to increasing social demands, including access to **nature and culture, ecotourism and active tourism, healthy outdoor leisure, and sustainable mobility**, while contributing to the **fight against climate change**.



Examples of Greenways in Spain, Italy and Ireland, photos: ©viasverdes.com, ©comune.roma.it, ©Royal Canal Greenway

Greenways provide **safe and user-friendly routes** for cycling, walking, running, wheeling, and other non-motorised activities, and are accessible to users of all ages, abilities, and capacities. In some regions, greenways running along rivers also offer opportunities for **zero-emission, water-based travel**, while in other parts of Europe, particularly during winter, they can be used for **cross-country skiing or sledding**¹.

Functioning as **green corridors**, greenways enhance both the **environment** and the **quality of life** in the areas they traverse, promoting sustainable development and healthy lifestyles

¹ The best examples of winter activities on Greenways can be found along the Latvian and Estonian Greenways, see: The Latvian Greenways Association, greenways.lv.

while providing a framework for **community-based initiatives**. They connect rural and urban areas and create numerous opportunities for **cooperation between municipalities and communities**, including in **cross-border contexts**.

The European Greenways Association (EGWA) was established in 1998 to encourage the creation and promotion of greenways across Europe. It brings together nearly **50 organisations and institutions from 16 European countries**, all committed to promoting greenways for active mobility, sustainable tourism, and healthy leisure for all types of users. Since 2003, EGWA has organised the **European Greenways Award** every two years, recognising outstanding greenways in the categories of **excellence, exemplary initiative**, and **green transition**.



12th European Greenways Award 2025, Spain, Abanto-Zierbena, Basque Country, photo: ©basquetour.eus

How can greenways contribute to the European Sustainable Tourism Strategy?

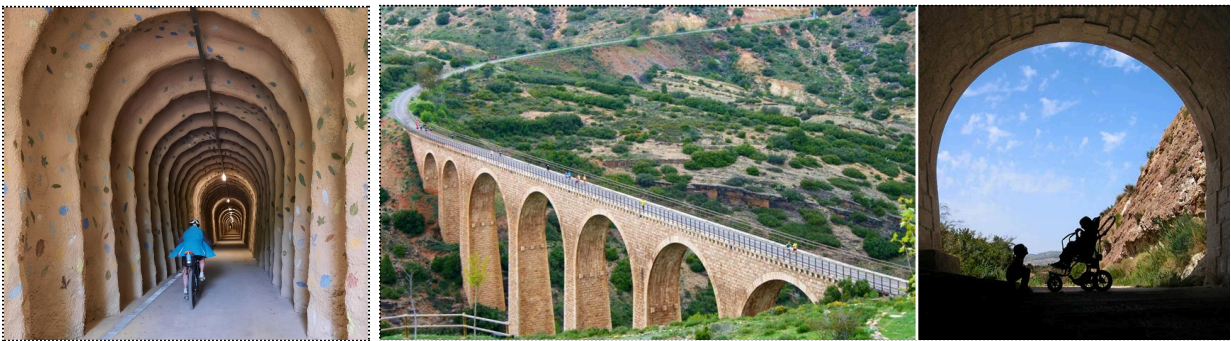
1/ Greenways provide green infrastructure for sustainable transport, travel, and mobility

A top priority of **EU tourism policy** on sustainable tourism is the development of **safe and accessible transport infrastructure** for cycling, walking, wheeling, and other non-motorised modes of travel. This objective is particularly advanced through the **conversion of disused railway lines and towpaths into greenways**.

Greenways are a **key instrument** for promoting sustainable tourism and mobility. They provide **safe, accessible, and user-friendly routes**, primarily developed on former railway lines and along canal towpaths, offering an effective and environmentally friendly alternative for non-motorised travel.

There are approximately **30,000 kilometres** of greenways in Europe, of which around **20,000 kilometres** are developed on former railway lines, representing only about **20% of all disused railway lines**. This highlights significant potential for further development.

For example, in Spain, **3,500 kilometres** of disused railway lines have been converted into greenways out of a total of 7,600 kilometres². In Wallonia, Belgium, the **RAVeL** network³ comprises over **1,515 kilometres** of routes reserved for walkers, cyclists, horse riders, and users with reduced mobility, of which approximately **700 kilometres** are developed on former railway lines. In Portugal, there are over **500 kilometres** of greenways (known as **Ecopistas**) currently in use, out of a total of **1,000 kilometres** of abandoned railway lines. The Portuguese program, coordinated by **IP Património**, focuses on preserving railway heritage, including historic train stations adorned with the country's famous **azulejos**⁴.



Spanish Greenways, photos: ©viasverdes.com

The integration of **non-motorised transport routes**, including greenways and cycle routes, into the broader transport network is essential to **promote the decarbonisation of transport** and to **support the development of sustainable tourism and mobility**. This **zero-emission network** contributes to the **diversification of tourism offerings** and the **extension of the tourist season**, providing alternatives that help **prevent overcrowding in popular destinations**.



RAVeL network in Wallonia, Belgium, photos: ©ravel.wallonie.be

² Programa Vías Verdes españolas, Spanish Greenways Program: <https://viasverdes.com>.

³ Réseau Autonome des VoiEs Lentes, Autonomous Network of Slow Ways: <https://ravel.wallonie.be/en>.

⁴ IP Património, Ecopistas: ippatrimonio.pt/pt-pt/ecopistas.

Key action proposed:

Include the transformation of disused railway lines into greenways as part of the European Sustainable Tourism Strategy, and facilitate European funding to support this process. Greenways, cycle routes, and other non-motorised itineraries constitute a key offering to promote sustainable tourism and decarbonise transport by encouraging active mobility, particularly cycling.

To achieve this, it is important to:

- a) Significantly extend and improve the existing network of safe, accessible, and well-connected non-motorised infrastructure, including greenways.
- b) Promote easy intermodality with public transport, especially trains, to facilitate active mobility through cycling, walking, and wheeling.
- c) Provide enhanced bicycle facilities, including additional spaces for bicycles on trains and secure parking areas for bicycles in and around railway stations and key tourism assets.



Ecopistas in Portugal, photos: ©Ecopista Tâmega & Corgo, ©ippatrimonio.pt

2/ Greenways help address climate mitigation and environmental protection

Promoting greenways as a means to reuse disused railways and other infrastructure represents a form of **circular economy**. Their construction generates significantly lower greenhouse gas emissions compared to new routes requiring extensive earthworks and foundations. In addition, greenways are shared by multiple types of users, including cyclists, walkers, and people using wheeled mobility devices. In the province of Girona, Catalonia, Spain, the **Girona Greenways network** helps save approximately **1,381.73 tonnes of CO₂ annually**⁵.

Studies by the French organisation **AF3V**, which implements greenways, show that well-designed routes, connected to a larger network and integrated with local cycle paths and discovery tours, can serve as a powerful tool to enhance a territory and showcase its tourist

⁵ Estudio sobre los usos de las vías verdes de Girona y el impacto económico, social y medioambiental de las rutas gestionadas por El Consorci de Les Vies Verdes de Girona, 2024: viesverdes.cat/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/ES_Sumario-Ejecutivo.-Estudio-usos-e-impacto-de-las-Vias-Verdes-de-Girona_compressed.pdf.

heritage. A coherent and attractive network of greenways thus contributes to the **ecological transition** and supports the collective effort to combat global warming⁶.

In 2025, a **Special Award for Green Transition in Greenways** was presented to the **Great Western Greenway Cycling & Walking Trail**, developed by Mayo County Council, Ireland. The Great Western Greenway, a **48.5-kilometre coastal walking and cycling trail** along the Wild Atlantic Way, is built on a disused railway line and exemplifies sustainable infrastructure by repurposing existing corridors with minimal environmental impact. The trail includes Ireland's widest boardwalk, constructed over undisturbed bogland, preserving sensitive habitats and supporting biodiversity. Environmental innovation is central to the initiative, with features such as **solar-powered compactor bins**, **e-bike charging stations**, and **public furniture made from repurposed wind turbine blades**, demonstrating circular economy principles in practice⁷.

Key action proposed:

Share and promote good practices that demonstrate how green infrastructure—such as greenways, cycle routes, and other non-motorised itineraries—contributes to environmental protection, while exemplifying **circular economy principles in practice**.



Great Western Greenway, Ireland / Picnic shelters made from recycled windmill blades, photos: ©greenway.ie

3/ Greenways support green transition in tourism sector and support local entrepreneurship

Active tourism, particularly through greenways and safe cycle routes, makes a significant contribution to the economic development of the regions it passes through, especially in rural areas. Demand for this type of tourism is growing across Europe and has considerable

⁶ Pierre Hémon, in: *Greenways surfacing: Challenge preconceived notions for an eco-friendly choice*, AF3V, Association française pour le développement des véloroutes et des voies vertes and FNE, France Nature environnement, May 2024.

Comparaison des revêtements selon leurs impacts sur le climat et la biodiversité Restitution du groupe de travail sur les revêtements. FNE / AF3V. Webinaire FNE | Mardi 16 Février 2021: af3v.org/greenways-surfacing-challenge-preconceived-notions-for-an-eco-friendly-choice.

⁷ Extract from the *Great Western Greenway application for the European Greenways Award*, Mayo County Council: greenway.ie.

potential for further expansion, a trend reinforced by the increasing use of **electric bicycles**, which make routes accessible to a wider range of users.

This form of tourism generates substantial economic benefits. In France, for example, cycle tourists spend an average of **€68 per day**, compared to **€55 per day** for other types of tourists, and the trend is clearly increasing. The economic impact of long-distance routes, such as the **“Loire à Vélo”** and the network of greenways and cycle paths in Brittany, has **doubled over five years**. Similarly, a recent survey conducted in Catalonia, Spain, focusing on the **Girona Greenways**, shows that **daily expenditure per tourist increased by 137.5%** between 2018 and 2024. What is more, the **Girona Greenways** network, with nearly **one million uses per year** and an **economic impact exceeding €9 million**, generates significant **healthcare and environmental savings** and attracts both residents and visitors, receiving **very high user satisfaction ratings**⁸.

Key action proposed:

- a) **Establish a dedicated line of European funding or grants** to support projects that create sustainable tourism products in rural areas, taking into account local realities and mobilising the local productive fabric. These tourism products should reflect the **values of the territory and the local community**. Priority should be given to initiatives based on **active mobility**, particularly cycling and walking, using **safe and accessible infrastructure**, and supported by services along the routes, such as **bike rental businesses** and **bike-friendly accommodation and services**.
- b) **Promote sustainable consumption in the tourism sector**, enabling consumers and organisations to make **environmentally friendly choices**.
- c) **Support and fund European projects** aimed at raising awareness and implementing improvements in the application of **environmental criteria for micro-enterprises**, including information campaigns and the adoption of basic sustainability standards. Such initiatives should be carried out by organisations linked to the sector in the region, with **follow-up, monitoring, and improvement plans**.
- d) **Encourage international and cross-border cooperation among companies**, enabling them to **share best practices, learn from one another, and strengthen their competitiveness**.

4/ Greenways strengthen local communities and promote inclusion of women, youth, and disadvantaged groups

Greenways are developed using **local resources and heritage**, contributing to the preservation and protection of natural and cultural assets. Greenway destinations, involving local communities across generations, focus on creating **attractive and engaging interpretations** of the local heritage, including history, arts, historical sites, landscapes, nature, and contemporary regional culture, as well as events celebrating local traditions.

Greenways also create opportunities for **less advantaged groups** to participate and contribute, promoting greater equality of opportunity. They actively involve **young people**,

⁸ *Estudio sobre los usos de las vías verdes de Girona y el impacto económico, social y medioambiental de las rutas gestionadas por El Consorci de Les Vies Verdes de Girona, 2024.*

women, senior citizens, and people with disabilities, giving individuals of all ages the chance to work for the common good. By facilitating participation across diverse groups, greenways play an important role in **advancing social inclusion and strengthening the role of women**, while enabling people with disabilities to access and enjoy the infrastructure and surrounding landscapes.

In the United Kingdom, the **Greenways and Cycle Routes Ltd.** uses **volunteer workcamps** to support the development of walking and cycling routes. Volunteers from all generations take part in activities such as building bridges over waterways, constructing abutments for road bridges, installing bat-friendly lighting in tunnels, and casting and installing new copings for railway viaducts. This approach fosters a strong sense of **local ownership** of the routes and helps train volunteers to **develop, maintain, and manage** the infrastructure in the long term⁹.



Greenways and Cyclerroutes volunteer workcamps in the UK, photo: ©greenwaysandcycleroutes.org / Greenways accessible for All, Girona Greenways, photo: ©viesverdes.cat

Key Action Proposed:

- a) European funding to support community-based initiatives that create opportunities for less advantaged groups, actively involving young people, women, senior citizens, people with disabilities.
- b) Support projects that contribute to the empowerment of women in sustainable tourism and ecotourism.

EUROPEAN GREENWAYS ASSOCIATION

16 COUNTRIES, 48 MEMBERS



EGWA, January 2026. Document prepared and edited by Mercedes Muñoz Zamora, Dominika Zaręba, Giulio Senes, Arantxa Hernandez Colorado. Photos: archives of EGWA and the Members.

⁹ Greenways and Cyclerroutes: greenwaysandcycleroutes.org.

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[Greenways - the European brand](#), Interview with Arantxa Hernández Colorado, Greenways Manager at the Spanish Railway Foundation and Secretary General of the European Greenways Association, by Dominika Zareba, 2025.

[Interview with Gilbert Perrin in the European Year of Rail](#), by Dominika Zareba, European Greenways Association, 2021.

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[Proposals for the European Sustainable Tourism Strategy from the Active Tourism Coalition](#), ECF, 20/01/2026.

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The European Greenways. *Good practice guide. Examples of actions undertaken in cities and the periphery*, European Greenways Association, European Commission DG-Environment, Namur, Madrid, 2000.

Exemplary videos:

>>> [Montes de Hierro Greenway \(Iron Mountains Greenway\), Basque Country, Spain - best Greenway of 2025](#)

>>> [Tâmega and Corgo International Ecovia, Portugal](#)

>>> [Cross-border Bicycle Festival on Iron Greenway in Poland and Czechia](#)



Iron Greenway Festival—Poland and Czechia, Cieszyn / Těšín Silesia, photo: ©olza.pl